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THE TRANSLATION OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT IN AMERICA: A PHASE OF THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN CRITICISM AND INTERPRETATION

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

By

JOHN LAMBUTH CHEEK

Private Edition, Distributed by
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This study has been directed in part against the misconception that the most significant development of the English Bible ended with the King James version of 1611. The second and more fundamental aspect of this thesis is its claim that the developmental trends in the history of New Testament translation in America can throw much light upon the general history of the rise of American biblical criticism. The basic problem therefore has been to define the character of American New Testament translation. The basic method of comparison first followed was that of collation of select passages, chosen on a principle of random sampling except for the provision that every major type of Greek style in the New Testament should be included. Further comparison was of course not limited to these passages; and this method was not applicable to textual variation.

There have been at least seventy-two fresh translations or revisions of the New Testament, in part or entire, in America. Various of these have been definitely revised for a total of at least seventeen more editions, or a total of eighty-nine. Of this total, forty-three new editions and eleven revised editions represent the whole New Testament.

Objectives of Translation

The immediate objectives may be classified according to (1) apologetic interest, on the one hand, or on the other, the desire to (2) revise the English style, (3) improve the text, or (4) make the translation itself more accurate. The first is apt to be increasingly prominent as one approaches the more popular groups of revisions, though the difference is one of degree. The classification is not a simple one; rarely if ever was there a case where a single purpose was operating. Church or doctrinal incentives have been present more often than not in a critical or

semi-critical approach, indicating the evolutionary character of progress in American criticism. Generally the textual interest has been an academic matter, though there have been exceptions even here.

The predominant objectives of translation divide American translation roughly into two periods. The modernization or improvement of English has always been a concern of American editors; yet from the first American Bible in 1808 to the publication of the Westcott and Hort critical Greek text in 1881, an equally important incentive was the need for a New Testament abreast of the times in its (Greek) textual basis. After 1881, however, with few exceptions the translations were based upon a Westcott and Hort or comparable text, or the modified text of RV. Thus the felt need for English revision which was present all along to a marked degree, has become the outstanding objective in the second period.

The Greek Text of the Translators

The Greek texts represented in American translations of the New Testament vary as widely as the underlying motives. A classification of the "first editions" shows that eleven editions may be said to have been based on a type of text corresponding to TR or that text as modified in a minor way by Buck, Mill, or other editors. Both the variations among the multitude of printings, and the frequent inconsistencies of the translators, make an exact and precise identification in every instance almost impossible.

Almost two-thirds of the total number of editions are based on a more critical text. Of these, three used Griesbach--one of them inaccurately--and two more made it an original basis for their text. One used Tittmann, as revised by Hahn; one followed Vogels. Four followed Tischendorf, and another apparently used Tischendorf as a primary basis for formulating his text. Half a dozen follow RV rather closely. Only one of these claims to have used the RV text as represented by Scrivener. A smaller number than might have been expected, or five, profess to follow the WH text, although the translators of the preceding group owe a large debt to that edition. Of this number, two used WH rather as a basis, though Panin showed slight variation outside of the doubtful readings. Two, finally, adopted the critical text of

Nestle as a basis.

The English of the Translations

English translations may be roughly classified in two groups: the smaller number which are merely revisions of KJ; and those which set out to be genuinely fresh translations. As might be expected, even the second group shows the predominant influence which KJ has exerted; so that this larger number must in turn be classified into translations which are overwhelmingly dominated by KJ, those which represent a "modernization" of KJ in syntax or vocabulary, and a smaller group, chiefly in the modern period, of those which introduce the more radical changes of the "modern speech" versions. Among the translations closer to KJ, there is a small group which is extremely literalistic.

The century and a quarter of American translation has witnessed a radical change in the dominant ideal of "biblical" style, as defined by the character of the translations themselves. Should a version of the New Testament make only the most necessary changes from the KJ form, because of the place it holds in our English tradition and its liturgical value? Or should it be made to read as much as possible like a contemporary book? The two extremes are clear in such works as those of Palfrey on the one hand who even outdid KJ in introducing fresh archaisms, and the other extreme represented by Goodspeed, who is most consistent in forsaking obsolescent language wherever possible. In the mass of translations there is no such clear-cut distinction, but an intricate variety of practice. Even today the two processes of revision and fresh translation are both defensible, and both are maintained. Yet through all the variation in usage, the trend of change has been a definite, if an irregular one. In the earlier period very few did more than to make minor alterations in the common version. Even a translation from an entirely different text such as Murdock's chose the Elizabethan style as properly "biblical." Around the middle of the nineteenth century there is a much more noticeable tendency to substitute modern pronoun and verb forms, and make more extensive alteration in the KJ version. Sawyer, for example, went a little farther than Campbell's revisions had gone. Norton introduced much more of fresh phrase and idiom though more commonly retaining the familiar pronoun. Wilson and others followed this general trend. In the meanwhile, Dickinson and Woodruff

adopted a still more radical principle of alteration of KJ style. In the last years of the century, and particularly in the present generation, the modern speech ideal has come into its own in America.

Progress in Interpretation

A sampling of typical problems of translation, difficulties of Greek idiom, points at which light has been thrown upon Greek vocabulary, and textual emendations, studied developmentally through the course of American translation and in comparison with some of the leading contemporary British translations, serves to reinforce the tentative conclusions thus far reached as to the character and the trend of American translation. One fact which emerges is that the influence of modern lexicographical study on translation has often been exaggerated. KJ and other early translations were often right in their interpretation merely on the basis of the context, even without the aid of the modern papyri parallels. At the same time, a very large number of more accurate interpretations have been introduced. Some of these appeared in American translation in the nineteenth century, even as early as Thomson (1808). They are most often found among the more scholarly translations, but this is by no means a safe generalization. It would be more accurate to say that they are found, in somewhat varying proportions, wherever there is some independent work and a fresh study of lexicons not based upon KJ. Much more important than this is, finally, the great advance which began at the close of the century in the translation of F. S. Ballentine. A much more prominent but not always consistent use of the modern vocabulary studies is indicated in Montgomery. In Goodspeed we find the most scholarly American representative of English New Testament translators, as measured by the manner in which he has constantly sought to apply to the problems of New Testament interpretation the results of the more recent studies of Greek language and literature.

The more general conclusions may then be briefly summarized. It is abundantly clear, in the first place, that the history of the English Bible does not end with the KJ and the revisions of RV and ARV. There has been a marked development along several different lines. This points of course to the need for a critical study of the whole field of English translation as a unit,

particularly since 1611. The accomplishment of this task, in view of the large number of new editions of the New Testament in English which have appeared since the KJ--more than twice as many as have been published in America alone--will require a still further refinement and modification of methods over those used in the present study. Some of the essential features would be (1) collation and classification according to the dominant readings, aims and point of view, methods and materials used, style, and so on; (2) attention to the large part which lexicons, grammars, and commentaries have played in the history of translation, as well as the relation of each translator to the preceding versions; (3) a larger consideration of the external as well as the internal history of the English Bible during this period.

In the second place, the line of development of American New Testament translation manifests certain features which in turn contribute to the total picture of the development of New Testament criticism and interpretation in this country. In regard to the text, the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century is shown to be a period in which a primary interest is textual, and in which there is a rising level of criticism of textual problems and the gradual acceptance of a more critical text, following in the wake of European scholarship.

Applied more specifically to the development of American criticism, American New Testament translation shows definite correlation with this development from 1808 to the present day. It began with the rise of theological seminaries in this country, and most of its notable translators have been either theological professors or trained ministers. The relation of this translation to the rise of a critical scholarship is thus apparent, and especially so in the increasing awareness of textual problems. Corresponding to both is the growth in American publication of Greek Testaments, grammars, and lexicons. In translation as in biblical criticism generally, progress was hampered by conservative theological and ecclesiastical views. At the same time, much American translation was done on a semi-critical or even popular level; and though this did not on the whole produce a finished product, it stimulated the desire for fresh translation. Finally, it may be said that American scholarship came into its own and reached the stage of independent research in the modern period.